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more

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Gizmo

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more

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Pics of the week

Superbabes

Babe Videos

Random videos
more

PAGE 3

Page 3 Idol 2009

Girls A-Z

Page 3 TV

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more

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Travellers turn top primary into UK's worst ... Crays Hill Primary school near Billericay, Essex

By NICK FRANCIS
and KATE JACKSON

Published: 04 Apr 2009

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IT WAS once described as a "chocolate box" village whose residents felt blessed to live in such a picture-perfect place.

Their children all went to the local school, where they received an excellent education and where parents joined together for harvest festivals and Christmas concerts.



Downfall ... standards at Crays Hill Primary bombed

where every child failed in the latest English and maths SATs exams. It means each of those children will leave primary school at 11 without a basic grasp of the three Rs.

Parents who live in the area now refuse to send their children to the school, preferring instead to bus or drive them to other schools further afield.

Mum-of-three and former parent governor Sally Aungier, 45, says: "Before the travellers arrived, the school was full, with about 200 pupils. Now there are only 50. There was a waiting list and kids came to the school from surrounding villages because it had such a good reputation.

"The whole place was lovely — it was like The Darling Buds Of May, a real chocolate-box village.

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This week it was named as the worst-performing primary in the country, It means each of those

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Mum-of-three and former parent governor Sally Aungier, 45, says: “Before the travellers arrived, the school was full, with about 200 pupils. Now there are only 50. There was a waiting list and kids came to the school from surrounding villages because it had such a good reputation.

“The whole place was lovely — it was like The Darling Buds Of May, a real chocolate-box village.

“Now the travellers have ruined the school and the community.”

It’s not the first time the primary school has come under fire. In September 2006 it was labelled the worst in the country for truancy when all but 15 of its 50 registered pupils failed to turn up for the new term.

Funding

It is not known how many non-traveller children still attend. Accounts from locals range from zero to five, while a report last year suggested the final remaining non-traveller had left the school. And during 2003 and 2004, every school governor resigned.

Now there are four parent governors, one staff governor, three community governors and three vacancies.

Funds woe ... ex-governor David McPherson-Davis

In 2005 it was estimated to cost £7,000 to educate each traveller child at Crays Hill. Former governor and dad-of-two David McPherson-Davis, 69, says: “When the traveller children joined the school, many were illiterate but there was no extra funding given to help with their needs.

“Parents felt their children were being held back and started taking them out of school. As far as I’m aware there is only one child from the village at the school now and two, three or four from neighbouring villages, so there are a maximum of five non-traveller children there.”

And one local who refused to be named adds: “I know some teachers have left Crays Hill because they couldn’t cope. They were on the verge of nervous breakdowns.”

Sally Aungier faced the difficult decision over whether to take her daughter Molly, now nine, out of the school.

She says: “I wanted her to stay but all her friends had left and she was no longer invited to parties and sleepovers.

“Molly had made friends with a travellers’ child and I was happy about that, but

the other girl's mother went mad when she saw them together and started swearing at them both. I also felt there was too much bias towards the travellers' children at the school."

Sally's son Tom, 20, who is studying for an NVQ in pub management and went to the school before the travellers arrived, says: "When I was there it was the best school in the area but it's better for Molly to go to a school with more children, where she can make friends. Crays Hill primary is about ten seconds' walk from our house but now Molly has to be driven to North Crescent School in Wickford." It is estimated there are between 200 and 400 travellers living at authorised sites which they own at Dale Farm and Hovefields in Wickford. But they have also spread out into unauthorised areas which are classified as green belt land.

Action

There they are prohibited from building any structures including their mobile homes, which are on hard standing, and a wooden shed that acts as their community centre.

In 2005 Basildon Council began a complicated series of court cases, appeals and injunctions.

Sad ... ex-pupil Tom

Currently the Court of Appeal has ruled the council do have the right to take enforcement action to evict the travellers.

However the travellers are intending to petition the House of Lords.

A Basildon Council spokesman says: "It could take a few months before it is decided whether the House of Lords will hear their case. If they do agree, it could take a couple of years before a decision is reached. Technically we can take action now but the council has decided to allow the travellers their right to exhaust every avenue open to them."

When The Sun visited Dale Farm, we found a large number of permanent-looking homes on the site.

Dogs roamed free and kids were unsupervised. One who looked about ten was driving a Volvo. The residents there refused to talk to us.

But amid the poor exam results at Crays Hill there are some glimmers of light. In its most recent Ofsted report, in July 2007, it was praised for a good standard of teaching.

Even so, the report also said: "The context of the school has changed significantly since the last inspection, with the withdrawal of all of the children from the local village in 2004, the mass resignation of the governing body and many staff changes."

And in the face of appalling recent SATS result and such fierce opposition from local parents, it is hard to see how Crays Hill can ever get a gold star again.

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